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Intercommunal Violence in Western Congo Kills Scores Latest Attack by Mobondo Militia Highlights Failure to Address Customary Dispute



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Bandundu's Malebo market turned into a camp hosting displaced people despite a Congolese government attempt to close it. © 2022 Venance Kalenga/Human Rights Watch

Gunmen massacred at least 20 people in an ambush in western [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), the latest in a spiralling cycle of intercommunal violence that has forced thousands to flee amid a deepening humanitarian crisis.

On June 26, Mobondo militiamen with firearms [ambushed a truck](#) carrying mostly Teke traders by the village of Mulunu in Kwamouth territory, just northeast of Kinshasa, the capital. The attackers then set the vehicle ablaze.

The conflict over land and customary claims erupted in June 2022 between so-called “native” and “non-native” communities; hundreds have been killed. The simmering dispute escalated into widespread violence after many farmers, mainly Yaka, rejected an increase of customary royalties by “native” Teke chiefs.

Groups calling themselves “Mobondo” after mystical amulets, mainly recruited among the “non-native” Yaka, Suku, Mbala, Ndinga, and Songo communities, have targeted Teke villagers with machetes, spears, hunting rifles, and military assault rifles. Congolese security forces have conducted operations, most recently in May, but failed to quell the violence. Multiple [attacks have happened](#) this year and the latest deadly incident is a reminder of the urgency of the crisis.

Human Rights Watch [previously documented](#) the conflict, which has expanded across the provinces of Mai-Ndombe, Kwango, and Kwilu and reached the outskirts of Kinshasa. Thousands of people have fled their homes, triggering a humanitarian crisis. The insecurity is preventing many students from attending their end-of-year school exams and putting voter registration for the next general elections in December on hold.

In late April, the Congolese government had set up [a commission of inquiry](#) to investigate abuses committed by security forces during previous operations. However, hundreds of surrendered assailants [have been transferred to military training centers](#) without ever having been vetted to ensure that new recruits have not been involved in serious abuses. Similarly, the government directed individuals – described as the intercommunal violence’s “intellectual authors” on a national police [wanted notice](#) – with mediating between the communities in conflict and helping to demobilize Mobondo members.

Rather than putting an end to the abuses, the lack of accountability for alleged perpetrators and instigators of crimes deepens mistrust among communities and fuels further atrocities. Meanwhile, the absence of meaningful and durable solutions over customary taxes and land tenure leaves communities exposed to more cycles of attacks and retaliation.

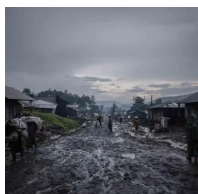
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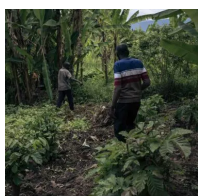
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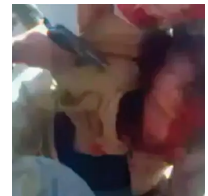
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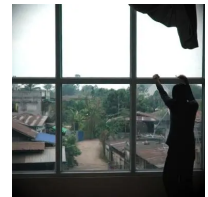
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